

**Claims:**

1. A method for providing an evaluation of a plurality of information sites to a user over a packet-switched network when the user submits a search request through a user interface device in communication with the packet-switched network, said method comprising the steps of:

acquiring a search result, responsive to the search request, which includes network addresses for the plurality of information sites;

selecting a plurality of individuals who were previously in communication with at least one of the information sites over the packet-switched network and who meet at least one predefined criterion selected by the user;

retrieving from a database a plurality of evaluations of at least one of the information sites, said evaluations being provided by said plurality of individuals; and

forwarding a rating based on said evaluations to the user over the packet-switched network.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of acquiring a search result includes the step of receiving the search result over the packet-switched network.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein the search request is submitted to a search engine and the search result is received from the search engine.

4. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of acquiring a search result includes the step of searching a second database to develop the search result.

5. The method of claim 2 wherein the search request is received from an Internet service provider that forwards the search request from the user.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein said evaluations are quantitative evaluations.

7. The method of claim 1 wherein said evaluations are qualitative evaluations.

8. The method of claim 1 wherein the rating includes a ranking of the plurality of information sites.

9. The method of claim 1 wherein said packet-switched network is the Internet and said network address is an Internet address.

10. The method of claim 9 wherein said Internet address is a URL.

11. The method of claim 1 wherein said information site is an Internet site.

12. The method of claim 1 wherein said Internet site is a web site.

13. The method of claim 1 wherein the user interface device is a personal computer.

14. The method of claim 13 wherein said personal computer includes an Internet browser through which the search request is submitted.

15. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing a window over the packet-switched network to a display of the user interface device, said window including a user selectable icon allowing the user to request that search results be presented in rank order.

16. The method of claim 15 wherein said plurality of individuals providing an evaluation includes a plurality of participants and said window further

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includes a pull-down menu that includes said series of predefined criteria for selecting a subset of the participants.

17. The method of claim 16 wherein said predefined criteria include self-rated levels of expertise in predefined categories.

18. The method of claim 16 wherein said predefined criteria are selected from the group consisting of activities, hobbies, demographics, subjects studied, and professional affiliations.

19. The method of claim 1 wherein said user and said plurality of individuals are subscribers to a common service.

20. The method of claim 19 wherein said common service is an Internet service provider.

21. The method of claim 19 wherein said common service is offered by a search engine operator.

22. The method of claim 15 wherein said window further includes a text box for receiving user evaluations of the information site.

23. The method of claim 15 wherein said window further includes a pull-down menu that includes a list of predefined ratings reflecting user evaluations of the information site.

24. The method of claim 15 wherein said plurality of individuals providing said evaluations includes a plurality of participants and said window further includes a text box allowing the user to specify at least one criterion for selecting a subset of the participants.

25. The method of claim 15 further comprising the step of forwarding an advertisement to the user over the packet-switched network.

26. The method of claim 15 further comprising the step of forwarding an advertisement to the user over the packet-switched network, wherein said advertisement is provided in said window.

27. The method of claim 25 wherein the step of forwarding an advertisement includes the step of selecting an advertisement based at least in part on the search request.

28. The method of claim 25 wherein the step of forwarding an advertisement includes the step of selecting an advertisement based at least in part on user information located in said database.

29. The method of claim 1 wherein said search request is a key word search request.

30. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing connectivity to the packet-switched network for the user interface device.

31. The method of claim 1 wherein said database includes biographic information concerning said plurality of individuals.

32. The method of claim 31 wherein said biographic information includes self-rated levels of expertise in predefined categories.

33. The method of claim 31 wherein said biographic information includes categories of information selected from the group consisting of activities, hobbies, demographics, subjects studied, and professional affiliations.

34. A method for providing an evaluation of an information site to a user over a packet-switched network when said user enters a network address of the information site into a user interface device in communication with the packet-switched network, said method comprising the steps of:

receiving over the packet-switched network a request from the user to receive an evaluation of the information site;

retrieving from a database a plurality of evaluations of the information site provided by a plurality of individuals who each meet at least one predefined criterion selected by the user and who were previously in communication with the information site over the packet-switched network; and

forwarding a rating based on said evaluations to the user over the packet-switched network.

35. The method of claim 34 wherein said evaluations are quantitative evaluations.

36. The method of claim 34 wherein said evaluations are qualitative evaluations.

37. The method of claim 34 wherein said packet-switched network is the Internet and said network address is an Internet address.

38. The method of claim 37 wherein said Internet address is a URL.

39. The method of claim 34 wherein said information site is an Internet site.

40. The method of claim 39 wherein said Internet site is a web site.

41. The method of claim 34 wherein the user interface device is a personal computer.

42. The method of claim 41 wherein said personal computer includes an Internet browser through which the search request is submitted.

43. The method of claim 34 wherein said plurality of individuals providing an evaluation includes a plurality of participants and further comprising the step of providing a window over the packet-switched network to a display of the user interface device, said window having a pull-down menu that includes said series of predefined criteria for selecting a subset of the participants.

44. The method of claim 43 wherein said predefined criteria include levels of expertise in predefined categories.

45. The method of claim 43 wherein said predefined criteria are selected from the group consisting of activities, hobbies, demographics, subjects studied, and professional affiliations.

46. The method of claim 34 wherein said user and said plurality of individuals are subscribers to a common service.

47. The method of claim 46 wherein said common service is an Internet service provider.

48. The method of claim 46 wherein said common service is offered by a search engine operator.

49. The method of claim 43 wherein said window further includes a text box for receiving user evaluations of the information site.

50. The method of claim 43 wherein said window further includes a pull-down menu that includes a list of predefined ratings reflecting user evaluations of the information site.

51. The method of claim 43 wherein said plurality of individuals providing an evaluation includes a plurality of participants and said window further includes a text box allowing the user to specify at least one criterion for selecting a subset of the participants.

52. The method of claim 43 further comprising the step of forwarding an advertisement to the user over the packet-switched network.

53. The method of claim 52 wherein said advertisement is provided in said window.

54. The method of claim 52 wherein the step of forwarding an advertisement includes the step of selecting an advertisement based at least in part on user information located in said database.

55. The method of claim 34 further comprising the step of providing connectivity to the packet-switched network for the user interface device.

56. The method of claim 34 wherein said database includes biographic information concerning said individuals.

57. The method of claim 56 wherein said biographic information includes self-rated levels of expertise in predefined categories.

58. The method of claim 56 wherein said biographic information includes categories of information selected from the group consisting of activities, hobbies, demographics, subjects studied, and professional affiliations.

59. An online system for providing an evaluation of a plurality of information sites to a user over a packet-switched network when the user submits a search request through a user interface device in communication with the packet-switched network, said apparatus comprising:

a database that includes at least one evaluation of at least one of the information sites and a network address thereof, said evaluation being provided by at least one individual who was previously in communication with said at least one of the information sites over the packet-switched network;

a processor for developing a rating based on said at least one evaluation; and

a server in communication with the packet-switched network for receiving a search result, responsive to the search request, which includes network addresses for the plurality of information sites and for forwarding said rating to the user over the packet-switched network.

60. The online system of claim 59 wherein the search request is received by the server from an Internet service provider that forwards the search request from the user.

61. The online system of claim 59 wherein said evaluation is a quantitative evaluation.

62. The online system of claim 59 wherein said evaluation is a qualitative evaluation.

63. The online system of claim 59 wherein the rating includes a ranking of the plurality of information sites.

64. The online system of claim 59 wherein said packet-switched network is the Internet and said network address is an Internet address.



65. The online system of claim 64 wherein said Internet address is a URL.

66. The online system of claim 59 wherein said information site is an Internet site.

67. The online system of claim 66 wherein said Internet site is a web site.

68. The online system of claim 59 wherein the user interface device is a personal computer.

69. The online system of claim 68 wherein said personal computer includes an Internet browser through which the search request is submitted.

70. The online system of claim 59 further comprising means for providing a window over the packet-switched network to a display of the user interface device, said window including a user selectable icon allowing the user to request that search results be presented in rank order.

71. The online system of claim 70 wherein said at least one individual providing an evaluation includes a plurality of participants and said window further includes a pull-down menu that includes a list of predefined criteria for selecting a subset of the participants.

72. The online system of claim 71 wherein said predefined criteria include self-rated levels of expertise in predefined categories.

73. The online system of claim 71 wherein said predefined criteria are selected from the group consisting of activities, hobbies, demographics, subjects studied, and professional affiliations.

74. The online system of claim 59 wherein said user and said at least one individual are subscribers to a common service.

75. The online system of claim 74 wherein said common service is an Internet service provider.

76. The online system of claim 74 wherein said common service is offered by a search engine operator.

77. The online system of claim 70 wherein said window further includes a text box for receiving user evaluations of the information site.

78. The online system of claim 70 wherein said window further includes a pull-down menu that includes a list of predefined ratings reflecting user evaluations of the information site.

79. The online system of claim 70 wherein said at least one individual providing an evaluation includes a plurality of participants and said window further includes a text box allowing the user to specify at least one criterion for selecting a subset of the participants.

80. The online system of claim 70 further comprising means for forwarding an advertisement to the user over the packet-switched network.

81. The online system of claim 80 wherein said advertisement is provided in said window.

82. The online system of claim 80 further comprising means for selecting the advertisement based at least in part on the search request.

83. The online system of claim 80 further comprising means for selecting the advertisement based at least in part on user information located in said database.

84. The online system of claim 59 wherein said search request is a key word search request.

85. The online system of claim 59 wherein said server also provides connectivity to the packet-switched network for the user interface device.

86. The online system of claim 59 wherein said database includes biographic information concerning said at least one individual.

87. The online system of claim 86 wherein said biographic information includes self-rated levels of expertise in predefined categories.

88. The online system of claim 86 wherein said biographic information includes categories of information selected from the group consisting of activities, hobbies, demographics, subjects studied, and professional affiliations.

89. A method for providing an evaluation of a plurality of information sites to a user over a packet-switched network when the user submits a search request through a user interface device in communication with the packet-switched network, said method comprising the steps of:

acquiring a search result, responsive to the search request, which includes network addresses for the plurality of information sites;

selecting a plurality of individuals who were previously in communication with at least one of the information sites over the packet-switched network and who meet at least one predefined criterion selected by the user;

retrieving from a database a plurality of evaluations of at least one of the information sites, said evaluations being provided by said plurality of individuals

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forwarding a rating based on said evaluations to the user over the packet-switched network;

forwarding said advertisement to the user over the packet-switched network.

91. The method of claim 90 wherein the search request is submitted to a search engine and the search result is received from the search engine.

93. The method of claim 90 wherein the search request is received from an internet service provider that forwards the search request from the user.

95. The method of claim 89 wherein said evaluations are qualitative evaluations.

97. The method of claim 89 wherein said packet-switched network is the Internet and said network address is an Internet address.

98. The method of claim 97 wherein said Internet address is a URL.

99. The method of claim 89 wherein said information site is an Internet site.

100. The method of claim 99 wherein said Internet site is a web site.

101. The method of claim 89 wherein the user interface device is a personal computer.

102. The method of claim 101 wherein said personal computer includes an Internet browser through which the search request is submitted.

103. The method of claim 89 further comprising the step of providing a window over the packet-switched network to a display of the user interface device, said window including a user selectable icon allowing the user to request that search results be presented in rank order.

104. The method of claim 103 wherein said plurality of individuals providing an evaluation includes a plurality of participants and said window further includes a pull-down menu that includes said series of predefined criteria for selecting a subset of the participants.

105. The method of claim 104 wherein said predefined criteria include self-rated levels of expertise in predefined categories.

106. The method of claim 104 wherein said predefined criteria are selected from the group consisting of activities, hobbies, demographics, subjects studied, and professional affiliations.

107. The method of claim 89 wherein said user and said plurality of individuals are subscribers to a common service.

108. The method of claim 107 wherein said common service is an Internet service provider.

109. The method of claim 107 wherein said common service is offered by a search engine operator.

110. The method of claim 103 wherein said window further includes a text box for receiving user evaluations of the information site.

111. The method of claim 103 wherein said window further includes a pull-down menu that includes a list of predefined ratings reflecting user evaluations of the information site.

112. The method of claim 103 wherein said plurality of individuals providing an evaluation includes a plurality of participants and said window further includes a text box allowing the user to specify at least one criterion for selecting a subset of the participants.

113. The method of claim 89 wherein the step of selecting an advertisement includes the step of selecting an advertisement based at least in part on the selected predefined criteria

114. The method of claim 89 wherein said advertisement is provided in said window.

115. The method of claim 89 wherein the step of selecting an advertisement includes the step of selecting an advertisement based at least in part on the search request.

116. The method of claim 89 wherein the step of forwarding an advertisement includes the step of selecting an advertisement based at least in part on user information located in said database.

117. The method of claim 89 wherein said search request is a key word search request.

118. The method of claim 89 further comprising the step of providing connectivity to the packet-switched network for the user interface device.

119. The method of claim 89 wherein said database includes biographic information concerning said plurality of individuals.

120. The method of claim 119 wherein said biographic information includes self-rated levels of expertise in predefined categories.

121. The method of claim 119 wherein said biographic information includes categories of information selected from the group consisting of activities, hobbies, demographics, subjects studied, and professional affiliations.